The Imprint of Education

The Imprint of Education (TIE) is a project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation that is exploring the post-graduation trajectories of Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program alumni. TIE is investigating topics such as ethical and transformative leadership, give back, employment and entrepreneurship, student support and mentoring. It consists of five sub-projects or learning activities. The TIE project principal investigators are Prof. Sharlene Swartz, Dr Alude Mahali and Dr Andrea Juan.

Reimagining the African University – Conversation Series

Learning Activity Four consists of a series of conversations with experienced scholars and thought leaders on the future of higher education in Africa. In Reimagining the African University, they discuss challenges, best practices, and the potential for innovation to initiate further dialogue. This transcript is part of a series of interviews conducted in 2021 and may be used with appropriate attribution for scholarly purposes. The learning activity is coordinated by Prof. Thierry Luescher, under the intellectual leadership of Prof. Crain Soudien.

Interview with Dr Rajesh Tandon
Interview conducted by Prof Relebohile Moletsane on 03 May 2021

Lebo Moletsane: Please describe your relationship with higher education in India and internationally.

Rajesh Tandon: I began my career as a lecturer at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta where I undertook my Masters in Business Administration (MBA). I subsequently completed my PhD at the School of Management at Case Western Reserve University in the United States (US). However, the fieldwork for the PhD was conducted among rural indigenous farmers in Rajasthan in western India, where I spent a year looking at their realities and their capacity to access government welfare programmes, such as a farmers' functional literacy programme and a rural development programme. In the process, I realised that the top-down delivery of these programmes through a bureaucratic machinery comprising officials who had never been farmers themselves created all kinds of disconnection and confusion, as well as some exploitation and abuse of resources. The conclusion of my research was that empowerment from below is essential for any meaningful development model to take root. In this context, I considered how organisations of small farmers could be capacitated so that they would be able to interface with the government delivery system and access their entitlements more effectively.

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This fieldwork also made me aware that despite my excellent professional education there were many things in life I did not know; by contrast with these so-called illiterate farmers who knew a lot, not just about agriculture, but about water, about cattle, and about living life itself. This led to my academic arrogance being undermined as I came to acknowledge that illiteracy does not mean ignorance.

A second consequence of this experience was that I realised that more work could usefully be undertaken directly with such people provided their knowledge and experience could be systematised in such a way that it could produce new knowledge and new experience. So, I embarked on a project to foster what would now be called academic-community partnerships, from which a new practice of participatory research has emerged.

During the 1980s, there was some resistance to this new approach from my academic peers in India, who acknowledged the value of the work in terms of community development, but not so much as a credible form of knowledge production. So, I got busy working directly with communities and local groups and building a network of people interested in participatory research during that period. Then, by the mid-1990s, the value of local knowledge in Asia was boosted as the World Bank and the Swedish, US and British aid agencies promoted consultation with local communities as a condition of their funding support for development projects. So, government officials who had previously seen themselves as trained experts in isolation came to the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), which I had founded, to learn about the use of this methodology. At the same time, in the second half of the 1990s, academics in India became increasingly interested in participatory research, which led to PRIA becoming more actively involved, particularly in training young students.

The work took a further major step forward from 2008, after the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), which is an offshoot of the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), asked me to write something about the role of civil society in human and social development. I wrote about how civil society brings development issues as these are experienced by communities to the attention of policy-makers and academics, whether these are gender issues or ecological issues or human rights issues or women's education issues. The paper considered the practical work that civil society does which then generates interesting research questions and policy issues. The collaboration with GUNI included preparation for the second Higher Education Conference of UNESCO, which was held in Paris in 2009 and at which a declaration was issued supporting higher education as a public good and hailing the value of indigenous knowledge.

The support proffered at this meeting for the notion of higher education as serving the public good signalled a sea-change in international policy. Previously, by the turn of the millennium, World Bank economists had convinced policy makers across the world that higher education is a private good – that is, a service for which people should pay – and that governments should

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withdraw from funding this sector. This was a message that was pushed down the throats of much of the developing world, even though, of course, none of the European countries themselves, including the United Kingdom (UK) or Canada had privatised their own higher education systems.

The declaration by the heavy-duty academics gathered at the 2009 conference that indigenous knowledge matters and should be respected also represented a significant shift.

It was during this work with GUNI and UNESCO that I first interacted with peers in African higher education. Subsequently, the collaboration with the continent has expanded through the Knowledge for Change (K4C) consortium, which I helped to establish with Dr Budd Hall, my co-chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education at UNESCO. This consortium has hubs in South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania at present, as well as across Latin America, Europe, North America and Asia.

The purpose of the consortium is to build capacity in each hub to conduct community-based research training that can produce the next generation of participatory-research students and practitioners. A related goal is that the students and practitioners at these hubs should generate knowledge on any of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as these may apply locally. The argument for the programme is that sustainable development goals and/or action on climate requires local knowledge and local community-led efforts; and, therefore, that universities need to partner with communities to produce such knowledge.

Meanwhile, in India, the government established a group to consider higher education's social responsibility shortly after the 2009 UNESCO meeting. As part of this, I have worked to help shape social responsibility policy and planning in the country. An important aspect of the work has been considering how the curriculum and pedagogy can be connected to local reality in the context of galloping enrolment in higher education. There are roughly 40 million students in the various kinds of higher education institution in India and two-thirds of these are first generation students whose parents may not even have finished high school, let alone attended university. The problem is that, notwithstanding the establishment of affirmative action programmes to foster access to university for students from indigenous communities and lower caste or economically deprived groups, the curriculum, concepts and language of teaching which confront them on entering these institutions are totally disconnected from their previous lived realities.

Although it is understood that Indians internationally speak excellent English, the reality is that this group comprises only 10-12% of the population. So, higher education conducted in English and dominated by European books and theories does not connect with many people's reality. Indeed, it leads to high drop-out rates particularly among students from poor communities; which in turn reinforces the view that higher education and more intellectual

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should only be the domain of upper castes, while the lower castes should acquire only skilled or lesser-skilled jobs.

As part of the national social-responsibility programme, I have sought to recruit grant-making bodies, which have some influence over higher education institutions to encourage universities to take their students into communities, so that they can interact with them and understand what is taking place on the ground. For example, how can one study hydrology and not go and see the local water reservoir? How can one study agronomy and not go and spend time with local small farmers? How can one study nutrition and not spend time with poor households and come to understand what nutrition means from their point of view, rather than from an idealised unaffordable perspective? Local communities have their own roots, herbs and foods, and their own ways of cooking. If the students gain an understanding of these, then maybe they will understand nutrition better. So, the goal is to foster a more community-relevant and -focussed pedagogy and curriculum.

Moletsane: How relevant do you think universities are to the current economic situation and governance demands in Africa? And how should such relevance be defined and promoted?

Tandon: Africa has some of the best universities anywhere in the world – which is an assessment made regardless of the international rankings which, in my view, are based on an institution's wealth, rather than any accurate measurement of the university's total contribution. The rankings, pay inordinate attention to the number of articles published in expensive journals that are only read by a dozen or so peers across the world, produce a particular idea of what a university looks like – and also implicitly negate the value and contribution of the knowledge and points of view produced in places such as India and Africa. Meanwhile, African universities are actually doing a good job of preparing the next generation of professionals. At the same time, they face a major challenge in relation to the relevance of the curriculum to the development needs of their own societies. As a result, many of the professionals that are being produced, may go and find work elsewhere – as is illustrated by the flight of Indian technology graduates to the US.

In this regard, there is a disconnect – a failure to foster understanding of national development needs and how these may be addressed – within higher education. Indeed, university education can even increase the gulf between the students and their societies and cultures. In some cases, this has led to local elders saying: "We will not send our children to college because they go there and then come back and tell us that our lifestyle is 'traditional' or 'inferior'." Students can become arrogant in the belief that the Western model of thinking and Western customs and behaviours – these hamburger habits – are more modern and therefore better.
So, they become divorced from their communities and unwilling to work there, even though the best efforts of university-produced professionals are required to address the development challenges posed in rural areas of India and Africa. This reluctance stems not so much from

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the poor amenities in these place or low salaries, but rather from a breakdown in understanding – these graduates no longer know that local reality.

In this regard, a key mission for African universities should be to foster social responsibility and community relevance tied to a sense of place, locally, nationally and regionally. This requires a break from the agenda for university studies historically determined by the Sorbonne for higher education institutions in Francophone Africa and by Oxford and Cambridge in Anglophone parts of the continent. The aim should be to align the teaching and learning at universities with African requirements and the development and deployment of African technologies.

Moletsane: What is your view of the competing versions of the African university? And what would your vision be for the African university of the future in terms of access, funding, social support, livelihood transitions and social impacts?

Tandon: The ideal for an African university would be one that is rooted in African soil, including at a regional level, and which draws support from all members of African communities including those who have not been to university. In this respect, there is an unfortunate divide between those who have gone to university and those who have not. The universities, not the communities, have created walls and withdrawn behind them and called it a campus; and their curricula fail to study and address the problems faced by communities. For example, most business management courses and theories are concerned with the operation of large firms, such as multi-national companies. They do not equip students with the business-planning tools to address the needs of small and medium enterprises, although such firms are crucial to local economic development.

So, the aim should be to forge higher education institutions which promote and respect knowledge that is of use locally, including in the country and the region. Such locally produced knowledge would also be of value in a two-way exchange of knowledge between the developing world and the global north, which should replace the present one-way flow of so-called wisdom from Europe and North America. In this regard, African experience, expertise, and knowledge has a crucial role to play, for example, in addressing climate change. In my view, the future solutions to this and other global challenges lie in Africa because the continent has not yet been fully corrupted by American and European models and policies.

However, the curriculum at African universities must be localised if they are to fulfil this potential, which may entail resisting the influence of the more powerful and better resourced institutions and forces in international higher education in an effort to promote autonomous thought.

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In this respect, I recently argued that the future of Australian universities had been placed in jeopardy by their focus on attracting high-fee-paying Chinese, Korean and Indian students and that in the process they had forgotten the importance of developing a curriculum for local society. Of course, such behaviour is supported by the present system of international rankings, the purpose of which is not even to attract talent anymore, but instead to bring in the money that comes with fee-paying students.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the cheap price of land away from the cities, universities have been established in rural areas of India and South East Asia but without any concern for local development needs. So, there are institutions sited amidst farmland which may teach business science and English, but which offer no courses in agriculture. The point is not that business science and English may not be useful subjects, but rather that there is a lack of care for the priorities of the region when such universities are established. Instead, when forging the curriculum, the founders of such institutions should be considering the nature of the region, such as whether it is hilly or desert, and the kinds of societies that may exist there. For example, if migrant labour represents one of the local economic pillars, such as was historically the case in Lesotho, the university's curriculum should focus on migration.

In the absence of such a drive to align the vision of the university with the local context, then the institution is liable to float in an uprooted manner; and may be deprived of important local funding, as those in the area refuse to support an institution that only produces graduates who move elsewhere. At which point, the broader public benefit of the university also comes into question; and the higher education sector becomes increasingly characterised as a private good.

One response to this trend has been the increasing engagement of philanthropies in the sector in an effort to restore its status as a public good. But this fails to address the root cause of the problem which is that universities will only be seen as valuable when what they teach and research is seen as being relevant to society – at which point, society, rather than piecemeal philanthropy, becomes the flagbearer of public higher education.

Moletsane: Considering the economies of African countries, how do you think your vision of an engaged university might be funded and resourced?

Tandon: The rest of the world need not adopt the European and North American model of large, comprehensive, highly resourced universities. Not every higher education body has to be a multi-faculty institution, offering all disciplines. Smaller colleges, which are more focussed on the needs of the region may be created. Community colleges, agricultural colleges, and nutritional or health colleges which are relevant to regional development needs may win significant local support.

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In terms of funding, I think public resources should be deployed for the initial investment in the land, faculty and technical facilities. International funding, including in the form of philanthropy, may also be available in support of research and professional development training, but the institution should not depend on such resources. However, private funding, such as that which supports the five or six fancy and quite expensive private universities in India, would not be an appropriate financing mechanism for institutions offering higher education to students from poorer and lower-middle-class and middle-class families.

A model of the kind of institution that I am recommending may be found at the University of Sassari in Sardinia, Italy, which is one of the K4C consortium hubs in Europe. This university has been serving the needs of the local town of Sassari, which has a population of a under half a million, for more than 460 years. Established locally, it continues to be funded by the business community, the church and the municipal government, because they value the university. Its courses, which are primarily undergraduate, are designed to serve Sardinia, not the rest of Italy. They include lots of professional education programmes which provide skills as well as new knowledge. In particular, the university, which has historically addressed the needs of local fisherfolk, has an excellent marine biology department.

Then, in relation to the issue of funding, I would not advise the wholesale adoption of the expensive institutional model for universities promoted in Europe and North America. Rather the principles underpinning this template should be taken and adapted to local circumstances, crafting a model which is locally sustainable. Otherwise, the danger is that the universities will become white elephants, which can be bought up as if they were commodities by philanthropists with deep pockets during periods of economic recession.

Meanwhile, Africa, where the young population is increasing, presents a great opportunity for designing a new form of higher education, which could become the envy of the rest of the world. However, it is important to learn the lessons of the past few decades of demographic growth and massification, when development of the higher education consisted merely in establishing new privately and publicly funded graduate factories rather than institutions dedicated to producing learned citizens capable of effectively addressing local socio-economic needs.

Moletsane: I want to take you back to the question of first-generation students entering these Cambridge-style universities. In addition to localising the curriculum, how can we support such students and enable them to become the kinds of professionals that we want them to be?

Tandon: First-generation students tend to enter university with great aspirations and high anxiety. The anxiety is about entering a new world, which nobody in their families has experienced. Sometimes such students are the first ones from their village to go to college or university, so, they have no knowledge of what college will be like. The anxiety is further

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exacerbated for those now living away from home for the first time in shared university accommodation. It is also particularly great for female students and lower-caste students, who are breaking a generational mould. The issue is that no one will have been able to tell them what to expect and what happens when they reach campus.

For many, the vulnerability is compounded as this is also the period in their life when they are transitioning into adulthood, gaining some personal independence for the first time. At the age of 18, they can now vote, marry and buy alcohol – all of which is happening as they enter a completely new environment, which unlike the local high school where everyone spoke and dressed more or less the same, features a diverse cohort and new kinds of interaction across class and gender. So, in the absence of any understanding of where they are going, is it like going into a forest not knowing what to expect – and then a lion comes out and says "hello" and the fear starts.

So, how should such students be prepared - and not just in terms of the strangeness of the experience but also in relation to the shape of their aspirations, which may be greatly influenced by their socio-economic background? In the present social-media world where everybody wants everything now, students from poorer backgrounds are particularly vulnerable and can quickly encounter serious trouble. For example, in India, credit cards have become widely available in recent years, which has led to the accumulation of significant debt. Students from wealthy families can be cushioned from the impacts of this, but those from poorer families may be forced into undertaking illegal activities to pay off their debts and may come to accept this form of debt management as the norm.

Moletsane: You have talked about the role of indigenous or localised knowledge at university. But I wanted to hear your views on how universities may manage the multiplicity of identities, including in relation to religion and culture, among their student cohorts. In particular, how should universities address this issue of diversity in terms of their curriculum and pedagogy?

Tandon: First of all, it is important to stress that culture is the place where knowledge is practised. For example, given that most universities around the world have been forged in the European tradition, the students at these institutions are actually learning European knowledge and being imbued into European culture. The graduation gown, which is similar to the black robes worn by judges and which can keep one warm in the cold, is totally European (and quite inappropriate in other countries which have their own codes of dress and where the heat may make T-shirts a more appropriate choice).

Similarly, the knowledge that is sought from local communities – for example, in relation to hydrology – is culturally embedded. Much of it derives from practice and has been passed down through the generations. In addition, it is never complete knowledge, nor is there any

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pretence that it is. So, for hydrology students, the task is to find elements in local community's understanding of water usage, for example, which are more generally useful.

In seeking to access such knowledge, the researcher may encounter knowledge-carriers or -keepers who come in particular cultural clothes, including in religious dress. They may also find that the indigenous knowledge is practised through ritual. However, it is the knowledge that is being conveyed, and not the dress that is worn or the ritual that is performed which is of primary interest to the researcher – which is an important distinction.

Of course, the unfamiliarity of the dress or ritual and the religious connotations of the performance of the knowledge can be seen as an obstacle by researchers who insist they are not religious (although not necessarily for those who have remained connected to their local communities and see such knowledge as an aspect of a traditional but faded wisdom). But the reality is that, if bearers of local knowledge are prepared to come and share their knowledge, they may well do so through rituals, and researchers should be open to this.

At the same time, it should also be acknowledged that there is a reluctance to engage with indigenous knowledge that goes beyond individual scepticism and touches on a level of deeper fear – so, the widespread adoption of community-based forms of research is unlikely to take place overnight. Nevertheless, there is a need to establish a process whereby students and faculty can go into local communities and interrogate, for example, traditional forms of agriculture, forestry, water management and nutrition – and learn from these.

Moletsane: What role should digital technologies play in the ideal African university; and to what extent and how may these technologies give rise to local African technologies?

Tandon: I think digital technology has added enormous value. But technology must be linked to the culture and society and its people, otherwise it is senseless. To give an example: About 25 years ago at a session which supposed to train staff in using the new technologies, the phrase "surf the net" was used. But neither the trainers nor the trainees had ever gone surfing, nor had they even seen a photograph of surfing, so the meaning of the term eluded them. Now, the use of the word "surf" in this context came about because much internet technology was developed in the San Francisco area of the US west coast, where there are lots of beaches and surfing. If the technology had been developed in India, for example in the Himalayas, they would probably have called it "climbing the net". The point being that technology is given meaning within particular cultural contexts. Although the principles of the technology are universal, the tool is used locally.

However, this understanding seems to elude the 20-somethings who are designing all the new apps as if their use were universally the same. For example, many technology platforms use English rather the local language, including a platform which was recently designed on behalf

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of the Indian government to communicate information about the Covid-19 pandemic. This was designed by technicians living in the city of Bengaluru or Delhi, who no longer live in the villages and who have lost touch with the life there. As a result, Indians in the rural areas who do not know English cannot gain access to the information on the platform.

In this regard, the most useful technologies are those that are the most available to local people, such as community radio in Africa, which discusses local issues in the local idiom or language, directly addressing the lives of the local audience. The goal for those designing digital technology should be to produce equally powerful, relevant media.

In this regard, I laid down a challenge at a talk for young professionals, which I delivered several years ago at the behest of Google. I invited them to accompany me to a village in North Bihar and sit with the local woman leader, who has been elected to take responsibility for village development for the next five years, and then develop software that she can use. The problem being that nobody seems to be able to do this; and she remains unable to use any of the latest software, which has been designed far away by designers in the city.

So, technology is essential but it has to be relevant. The technology applications that are developed for agriculture or health or learning have to be contextually relevant. So, Africans should develop their own apps – and should not invite Indians to develop these on their behalf.

Moletsane: The Covid-19 pandemic has shown just how unprepared we are for a changing world. How can this ideal university that we have been describing become a little bit more agile in responding to changes in the world?

Tandon: The two organisations in the world which are least amenable to change are vertical organisations and the university. The university structure which was developed in Europe in 13th century persists to this day across the world. Any change requires the approval of a number of academic bodies. So, for example, it can take five or seven years to approve a curriculum change or a new course. The challenge is similar to that faced by the Vatican, which continues to struggle with the question of whether abortion is okay or not, or whether priests who abuse boys should be punished or not. The institution, which is a prime example of a vertical bureaucracy, just cannot figure it out.

Meanwhile, pandemics may arise and the importance of agility in responding to situations has become increasingly evident. The response to the need for such agility at higher education has been to create semi-autonomous units within the institution. It is a similar model to that adopted by large companies which establish discrete divisions in order to ensure effective management of different kinds of operations, such as, for example, steel production and mobile telephony. The principle also applies at universities. Different approaches are required to run a chemistry laboratory and a political science or sociology unit.

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However, it remains difficult to promote change at higher education institutions. For several years now, I have been trying to promote the inclusion of the SDGs in the curriculum and am invited to speak on the subject as a guest lecturer from time to time. But the old curriculum persists and I am told that it will take perhaps seven years to change – by which point the time-frame for the SDG targets will have expired. So, universities require a fresh way of organising themselves as institutions.

Moletsane: From your experience and work, what would you regard as some of the best innovations or practices which may be held out as a model for improving higher education?

Tandon: For me, there is no single university that should be emulated but rather a number of interesting and innovative practices at a range of universities and within civil society that may offer valuable models. For example, some universities in Indonesia have a compulsory six-week placement in a local village for all undergraduate students, which is their way of saying that the cohort must become sensitive to the realities of village society. Some institutions have similar kinds of summer placements. Some invite traditional knowledge-keepers to conduct regular seminars. It would be worthwhile to document the wide range of such practices, which could then form the basis of recommendations to promote engaged scholarship.

Another major issue is language. Much of the teaching in higher education is conducted in European languages – but this does not have to be the case. For example, several years ago in Qatar a decision was made to teach all subjects, apart from engineering, in Arabic. Previously, the universities in Doha, where there is a large expatriate population, had taught in English, which was preventing access for local would-be first-generation students who did not know English. Of course, the change caused problems for some of the lecturers who did not know how to teach in Arabic, but enrolment increased, and an increasing number of graduates from these institutions started working in Qatar instead of migrating abroad.

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